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Kentucky farm taking tobacco money to process llama wool

The Associated Press

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LEXINGTON, Ky. -- Landmark Farm looks like any other well-tended homestead until you get a glimpse of llamas grazing in the field and see the century-old tobacco barn stripped with new wood.

A closer look inside the barn reveals a handful of gleaming machines and gadgets that make up a wool processing plant.

It's here that a group of craftspeople in central Kentucky hopes to create a new market for wool products by bringing wool processing closer to home.

The group has received \$46,385 in state tobacco settlement money and \$5,000 from Bourbon County and \$3,000 from Jessamine County. Previously, Lanette Freitag, who is spearheading the efforts of the Kentucky Wool Society, said wool had to be shipped out of state to be processed.

Some of the society's members raise their own animals for wool, said Freitag, who has eight llamas and eight sheep. Others buy wool from local farmers.

After 18 months of working to secure funding, Freitag and the other society members began transforming the Bourbon County tobacco barn in August.

Roughly half of the state's \$3.45 billion in tobacco settlement money has been earmarked to promote agricultural development and diversification, said John-Mark Hack, executive director of the governor's office of agricultural policy.

"This is the first year this barn hasn't been used for tobacco," Freitag said, unlocking the door of the 100-year-old building to reveal a modern room full of equipment designed to refine untreated wool.

The quiet is disturbed by the rumble of the machines as Freitag demonstrates the process, moving from the washing machine where the wool is cleansed of its natural lanolin to a machine that loosens the threads and finally to an elaborate set of rollers and gears that turns wool into smooth batting.

Off to the side is what Freitag considers the group's niftiest gadget.

"This is really cool," said Freitag, bending to watch hundreds of needles transform batting into a thick felt. "This is the only one like it in the United States." This sleek piece of equipment, bearing the serial number "01," is called a needle felting machine and was designed especially for the Kentucky Wool Society.

Janice Hensley, who spins wool and creates shawls and scarves, said she's certain the project will take off.

"This is happening all over the country, really," Hensley said. "There are small co-ops making all kinds of things. It is working elsewhere, and it is working well."

Eventually, part of the barn will become a retail store, and Freitag hopes to offer classes to help people learn how to make a variety of crafts with wool.

"I really think wool should be more of a crafts supply," Freitag said. "We are hoping to convince people that it can be a crafts supply."



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